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ABSTRACT

A study examined the literature to determine the veracity of the criticism of some educators who say that family literacy programs in the United States fail to take into account important cultural issues when dealing with certain target groups. Issues invoked included the need to take traditional cultural values and practices into account in family literacy and a need to define family literacy broadly enough to take advantage of the different ways in which literacy learning may be transmitted from one family member to another. The main argument was illustrated by two case studies: the first described family literacy among Southeast Asian immigrants in the United States, and the second described family literacy in four villages in rural Mali. The case studies showed ways in which using mainstream assumptions in family literacy might not be appropriate in all communities. Three recommendations were made: (1) a more flexible approach to the vision of family literacy; (2) better understanding of effects of particular types of literacy programs on communities; and (3) more research components built into family literacy programs for ongoing evaluation. (Contains 21 references.) (YLB)

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Family Literacy in Cultural Context: Lessons From Two Case Studies

Laurel D. Puchner

University of Pennsylvania

NCAL Technical Report TR97-01

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Family Literacy in Cultural Context: Lessons From Two Case Studies

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Abstract

This report discusses the need to take cultural context into account when implementing family literacy programs. The report begins with an overview of the concept of family literacy in general, followed by a discussion of cultural issues in family literacy. The main argument of the report is then illustrated by two case studies, the first describing family literacy among Southeast Asian immigrants in the United States, and the second describing family literacy in four villages in rural Mali. The case studies show ways in which using mainstream assumptions in family literacy may not be appropriate in all communities. The paper concludes by calling for (a) a more flexible approach to the vision of family literacy, (b) better understanding of effects of particular types of literacy programs on communities, and (c) more research components built into family literacy programs for ongoing evaluation.

National Center on Adult Literacy

Introduction

Family literacy programs in the United States have been criticized by some educators for failing to take into account important cultural issues when dealing with certain target groups (Auerbach, 1989; Gadsden, 1994; Hardman, in press). Issues invoked include the need to take traditional cultural values and practices into account in family literacy, and a need to define family literacy broadly enough to take advantage of the different ways in which literacy learning may be transmitted from one family member to another. This report attempts to synthesize some of the existing research on family literacy in a cultural context, especially as it pertains to Southeast Asian immigrant communities in the United States. It will use an additional case study of family literacy in a developing country context in order to highlight some of the known cultural issues as well as to pose some additional problems.

The report begins with a brief overview of family literacy in America, followed by a review of the major cultural issues to be discussed in the paper. Next, the report provides two case studies: the case of family literacy among Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese immigrants in the United States, and a case study from Mali, West Africa. The case studies are then discussed in terms of how examining literacy in a cultural context can inform ways in which family literacy is studied and promoted in multiple cultural contexts in the United States and elsewhere.

Family Literacy: Background

The family literacy movement arose in the United States in the 1980s out of concerns about adult illiteracy, global competitiveness, school success for children and teenagers, and the social disintegration of the family. The basic premise of the movement is that low-literate or low-English-proficient parents are not able to provide an adequate literacy experience to their children. Family literacy programs try to improve the literacy skills of parents so as to increase the chances that their children will be successful in literacy (Gadsden, 1994). Underlying family literacy efforts is one of two sometimes overlapping beliefs: Parents' literacy has a significant influence on children's literacy, and literacy serves to empower both children and parents (Gadsden, 1994).

The major goals of family literacy programs include (a) breaking the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy; (b) improving parenting skills, educational levels, and employment on the part of adults; and (c) on the part of children, providing for better school achievement, lower school drop-out rates, and a more literate future workforce (Nickse, 1990). Most American programs began at the grassroots level but many have been formalized in the last ten years through a variety of legislative initiatives of the federal government. In addition to publicly funded programs, there are programs run by corporations, private organizations, and foundations (Nickse, 1990).

One problem faced by family literacy advocates in the United States is the lack of empirical evidence supporting the programs. Most programs are in their initial stages, and are service and not research oriented (Nickse, 1990). Therefore, although it is possible to find some theoretical support for family literacy from related fields such as adult literacy, emergent literacy, cognitive science, early childhood education, and family systems theory, there is little other evidence that family literacy programs actually fulfill the various goals for which they are designed.

A major exception to the poorly funded evaluation efforts of most family literacy programs is the National Evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program. Even Start is a federally funded program that encourages partnerships among providers and parental involvement in planning and design of programs aimed at promoting the literacy of parents and their children.

The program involves a built-in evaluation component focusing on demographic characteristics of participants, implementation, and effects on parents and children in terms of literacy skills, parenting, GED (high school equivalency diploma) attainment, and school readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

Although family literacy in its American form has not traveled to the developing world, programs that involve both families and literacy activities are common. Organizations focusing on children, such as the Bernard van Leer Foundation and Save the Children, have believed since their beginnings that the lives of children cannot be significantly changed in isolation from their families; hence the interventions of these organizations generally involve family and community members. In addition, other early childhood education programs show diverse forms of parental involvement, including serving on parent committees, helping parents provide a stimulating environment in the home, and parental observation of preschool activities (UNESCO, 1991). In addition to the activities with older roots, there appears to be a recent resurgence in interest in family involvement in the development of young children. Organizations such as the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and UNESCO have recently launched family-oriented preschool educational programs (Myers, 1991).

As in the United States, very little research on family literacy exists for developing country contexts. One exception is a study undertaken in Morocco, which examined effects of parental attitudes and values on children's literacy acquisition and school achievement (Wagner & Spratt, 1988). Among other items, the study found that parents of higher achieving children tended to report more involvement in their children's school progress and to hold more "progressive" views towards the constitution of the ideal family. In addition to the above study, some evaluations of programs involving parental involvement in early childhood education have shown positive results for children's school learning (Myers, 1992).

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Cultural Issues in Family Literacy

Family literacy in the United States today is characterized by the application of various family literacy models across the country (such as direct literacy instruction to adults, in hopes that the effects will indirectly trickle down to children, or direct instruction to parent and child together; Nickse, 1990). One problem with these models is that they reflect a set of norms that have been established by mainstream social policy. In attempting to apply the norms inherent in these models to all individuals, American educators are making the mistake of ignoring important ecological issues, by neglecting to take into account the relationships between people and the contexts in which people interact (Bartoli & Botel, 1988; Taylor, 1983). This individualistic, normative approach to family literacy reflects traditional ways of thinking about literacy as an autonomous technical skill that can be taught to individuals and the effects of which can then be measured. It ignores the ways in which cultures and contexts shape the development of literacy, and adapt literacy to their own purposes (Kulick & Stroud, 1993; Street, 1993), and carries with it certain cultural assumptions that make it of limited value when taken out of a Euro-American context. These assumptions also may limit the full range of possibilities that exist in family literacy approaches. Understanding these cultural issues has the potential for making family literacy more useful in multiple contexts in America and internationally.

A first set of assumptions inherent in this normative approach to family literacy concerns the way in which family literacy tends to be defined and operationalized as the development of literacy skills in parents (usually mothers) so that they may pass these skills on to their young children. This restricted notion of family literacy pays too much attention to the mother-child dyad and fails to take advantage of or take into account multiple other channels of literacy

influence within families. For example, limiting the focus to intergenerational learning ignores possibilities for learning transfer from adult to adult or child to child within the family. It also does not allow for literacy or language transmission from child to adult, which may be prominent in immigrant families where the literacy skills of the younger generations tend to surpass those of the older ones. In addition, while traditional family literacy programs focus on literacy interactions between parents and very young children, some immigrant parents are more concerned with ways in which they may better communicate with their older children (Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

Literacy skills may be influenced in many ways besides direct transfer of reading and writing skills from one family member to another. Weinstein Shr (1993) writes of working with elders in some immigrant communities to collect memories and stories that can then be passed to younger generations. In this way, young children can practice reading at the same time that they are learning about their own cultural histories. Literacy is also influenced within families by social, economic, and political factors. For example, improving health education among adults in a family may indirectly impact children's literacy, since healthy children are more likely to do better in school. Political education concerning women's rights and other issues may be beneficial as well, as awareness about such issues may influence the way parents interact with their children. In short, broadening the definition of family literacy to include literacy influences among all family members and of a variety of types may make it more useful in all contexts.

The second set of assumptions that are often carried by family literacy educators concerns ways in which literacy development occurs in families. For example, it is often assumed under a Western model of development that children succeed in school because parents do school-like activities in the home with them, and talk to them in a certain school-like way. When parents do not attempt to communicate with their children's teachers and other school officials, it is often assumed that they do not care about their children's education. In fact, different cultures have different strategies for helping their children succeed in school. For example, although some limited-English-proficient adults do not feel qualified to help their children directly do their homework, they help in other ways by creating space for homework to be done, or by tacitly observing homework activities (Hardman, in press). Children themselves rely more on siblings and others in the community than their parents in getting the help they need (Weinstein-Shr, 1993). Parents may not attend school meetings because they hold cultural beliefs that parents should not interfere with what teachers do and because they lack language skills, not because they do not value their children's education (Hardman, in press; Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

A third global assumption carried by the family literacy movement is that literacy is always a positive force. What this assumption fails to recognize is that becoming literate in a certain language in a certain context may have a significant impact on community and family, sometimes contributing to changes in and even a breakdown of the stability of these structures. For example, when younger generations of some immigrant groups in America acquire English language skills that their parents do not have, the moral authority of elders, traditionally a major stabilizing factor in the community, may be lost. These issues will be illustrated more fully in the following two case studies.

Family Literacy Among Southeast Asian Immigrants in the United States

Thousands of Southeast Asian immigrants arrived in the United States from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Several researchers have studied literacy,

language, education, and socioeconomic practices of these groups in various areas in the United States. This case study is a synthesis of the findings of certain key studies as they relate to family literacy (Caplan et al., 1989; Hardman, in press; Hardman, 1994; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Skilton Sylvester, 1997; Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

The immigrant groups of this case study are refugees, uprooted from their countries due to the repercussions of the Vietnam War, Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia, and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Most lived in refugee camps in Thailand and elsewhere for months or years before coming to America, and arrived in the United States with limited or no English skills. Upon arrival, some were literate in their native language, and many were not. For example, although the Hmong of Laos had a history of inexperience with formal education, many had learned Hmong literacy through informal channels. The Cambodian refugees, however, were less likely to be literate since educated Cambodians were the first to be destroyed under the regime of Pol Pot.

In general the refugee groups began life in America living in poverty, but as a group their standard of living has increased steadily since their arrival (Caplan et al., 1989). Another general characteristic of the immigrants is that the children tend to do well in school, especially in math, despite arriving with little or no English skills and having missed one to three years of schooling. The tendency toward rising out of poverty and high school achievement may in part be attributed to the general survival skills and ability to adapt that characterize the immigrant groups. For example, one survival strategy has been the development of community organizations, which are run by young men chosen by the community to mediate between the immigrants and the American world.

The group that comprises this case study is very diverse, yet it carries some general common characteristics related to family literacy. One very important overriding characteristic that has several consequences is that adults and children have language and literacy skills which differ from each other. School attendance and other social and cognitive factors have led children to have better English speaking, reading, and writing skills than their parents. At the same time, native language skills of the children are usually inferior to those of their parents. While children usually speak their native tongue, they generally do not speak it as well as their parents, and they often cannot read or write at all in their native language. It is not uncommon to find a complete gap in written communication between parents and children, as parents cannot write their children's names in a way that their children can understand (Hardman, in press).

One consequence of the divergence in language skills between parents and children are problems with communication between different generations of immigrants. One reason many adults desire to learn English is so that they can communicate better with their children (Weinstein-Shr, 1993). One Hmong woman, for example, expressed fears that her grandchildren would not know what life was like in Laos, and she would have no way to tell them (Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

Because children have superior English skills, parents depend on them to translate for them, to solve language and literacy problems for them, and in general to act as a liaison with the outside world. This situation represents a role reversal, whereby parents lose moral authority over their children. This is troubling for parents, who feel helpless and ashamed in front of their children. Weinstein-Shr (1993) tells of a Cambodian man who had not realized that his son had been expelled from school until six months later when a neighbor informed him. The son left the house at eight and returned at four every day, and normally the father depended on his son to translate school messages. Other examples demonstrate the control that children perceive themselves to have: A Laotian teenager tried to prevent his mother from learning English by informing her that she was too old, and a Vietnamese son hovered on the line whenever his

mother's English tutor called, as if English were his domain to supervise and control (Weinstein-Shr, 1993). In fact, some parents may not want their children to become highly proficient in their native language in order to remain more competent than their children in that area, and thus not feel as though they have lost total control (Skilton Sylvester, 1997).

Children may also find the role reversal difficult, as they perceive that their parents are no longer in control, or feel uncomfortable being treated as an authority in front of them. Weinstein-Shr (1993) tells of a local conference in Philadelphia where Asian teens were asked to give advice to teachers. One boy asked that if he were to translate during a conversation between teachers and his mother that teachers look at his mother and not him when they spoke.

Another consequence of the difference in language skills between generations is a tension felt by some parents between a desire for their children to be successful in America and for them to know their native culture. Hardman (in press) describes the situation of one Chinese-Cambodian woman who wanted her children to be able to speak to her mother and sister, and thus paid for her children to take Chinese lessons. At the same time, she sent her children to a different school from others in the neighborhood, a school where there were fewer Asian children, so that they would go to school with more Americans and thus learn English well. She also did not want her children to have a Cambodian teacher in school, as she felt American teachers would do a better job. As for the children, they did not wish to learn Chinese, and would have preferred that their mother use the money for extra English lessons instead of Chinese. Another Cambodian woman with limited English skills claimed that her children did not like to speak Cambodian, and when she addressed them in Cambodian, they responded in English. She stated that elders in the community looked down on her because her children did not speak Cambodian well, but she did not want to overburden them with Cambodian lessons since they already had so much work to do for school (Hardman, in press).

There is a third consequence related to the gap in language skills between parents and children: Since parents are not able to help children with schoolwork directly, due to their poor English language skills, both parents and children have developed strategies to deal with the situation. Education is highly valued in immigrant families, but traditional Western options for ensuring school success, such as helping children with homework and doing school-like activities in the home, are not open to these families. Parents also tend not to communicate often with school officials because of their poor English skills and a cultural desire not to interfere with school. Thus parents use other strategies, such as setting up designated physical areas for homework, and organizing after school household activities around the completion of children's homework. Hardman (in press) describes a Cambodian house in which the entire living room appeared to be organized around homework. While parents in the family were not actively involved in the schoolwork activity, they silently observed the children doing their homework. Weinstein-Shr (1993) describes efforts of an entire Hmong clan from Laos to help their children do well in school. This Hmong clan decided at a meeting in Nebraska to hold parties for children of the clan all over the country, and give them a quarter for each "A" they got in school.

The children also develop strategies that differ from their American peers. One important way in which the children make up for the lack of parental knowledge is through sibling support. Hardman (in press) describes how the older children in the Cambodian families he observed always helped the younger children with their homework, once even to the point of doing the whole assignment for a younger sibling who was sleeping. An excerpt from a description of family life in America told by a Laotian immigrant woman also demonstrates this phenomenon: "Only my oldest son has much homework and lots of books to read. He spends about two or more hours on his homework. The young ones spend only about half an hour. They do their work by themselves, or the oldest one helps his brother and sister if they have any problems. We don't know how to help them because we don't have enough education..."

(Caplan et al., 1989, p. 112). In addition to sibling support, the children also may develop social relationships with English speakers outside the family (Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984), or may frequent the local library after school hours where they receive support from librarians (Hardman, 1994).

The development of such strategies is an example of the general ability to adapt that characterizes the immigrants. Another example of this adaptability has been the softening of family gender roles relative to their traditional way of life. Strict gender rules restricted the freedom of women and girls in their native countries, but the felt importance of girls' education in America and the economic necessity of women's work has led to at least a partial relaxation of these rules. Women provide part of the family income in many households, and girls are allowed freedom insofar as it is related to educational activities. In fact, some women and girls may use educational activities as a way for them to get out of the house without breaking any gender rules (Skilton Sylvester, 1997). The following quote from an interview with a Laotian man is a further illustration of this phenomenon:

> discovered that my wife is intelligent. She has learned English faster than I did, and she seems to know a lot. She used to work, but then she quit because she was pregnant. I felt happy that she could contribute to helping the family financially. In Laos it was only the husband who had financial responsibility. (Caplan et al., 1989, p. 101)

Family Literacy in Four Villages in Southern Mali: A Case Study

The information for this case study comes from nine months of fieldwork in the Kolondieba District of Mali in 1994–1995, studying the impact of literacy program participation on women. The study used a variety of methods, including household observations, observations of literacy classes, interviews with women and other community members, and administration of a questionnaire and test to 80 women of varying literacy abilities.

Mali is a large West African country with a population of about eight million. One of the poorest nations in the world, Mali has an infant mortality rate of 170 out of 1000 live births, and an average annual income of $270. The predominant occupations are agriculture and herding; there is practically no industry. Despite the fact that the government spends 25% of its budget on education, the national schooling rate is 30%, with only 40% of those starting in first grade making it to sixth grade.

Kolondieba District is located in the southeastern portion of the country, not far from the nation's border with Ivory Coast. There is very little infrastructure in the region, which is characterized by the absence of paved roads, electricity, or running water. Statistics from 1993 state that there were four doctors in the district at that time (one for every 33,000 people), 29 nurses, and four formally trained mid-wives (Institut Supérieur de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée, 1993). There are only 29 formal primary schools and two Islamic schools for 207 villages. The schooling rate in the district as a whole is only 9.4%, with 12.3% for boys and 6% for girls. The adult literacy rate is 15% for men and 5% for women (Keita, 1994).

The study primarily concerned four villages in Kolondieba District: Boundio-Ba (estimated population 1500), Koloni-Boundio (pop. 400), M'Piediana (pop. 200), and Kologo (pop. 200). A few children from the two larger villages attended formal school in nearby towns, and these larger villages also each had a community school with enrollments of 60 children per school. The smaller villages had no community schools and no children attending formal school. Each of the villages

had an adult literacy program but the adult literacy rates in the villages were quite low, reported to be between 3% and 14%. The study found there to be several (five to seven) women in Boundiba who had attained some functional literacy competency, a few (two to three) such women in Kologo, and none in the other two villages.

Three languages were used in the communities studied. Bambara was the spoken language of everyday use, and the first and only language of the vast majority of the population. It was also the language used for teaching adult literacy. French is the official language of Mali, and is the language of formal education and of the administration, but it was very rarely spoken in the villages. Arabic was used purely for religious reasons, such as prayer recitation, and learning about the Koran. As for written language, there was very little print of any kind to be found in the villages, as judged by even the most meager standards.

This discussion of family literacy in a rural Malian context centers around three central questions. First, what are community notions of how adult literacy, among women in particular, might influence literacy in the rest of the family, and how is that related to women's reasons for becoming literate? Second, what types of family interactions around literacy actually occur? And third, what appear to be the main channels of influence for literacy within the family?

The idea that women's literacy (in Bambara) would be beneficial to the whole family was a common notion among development workers, literacy teachers and other authority figures in the villages. Save the Children (SC), an American non-governmental organization (NGO) that worked in the region, carried out yearly recruitment campaigns for the literacy classes. During these campaigns, development workers put forth a list of supposed benefits for women's literacy, including improved ability to take care of husband and children, and improved household management in general. When asked about the purpose of teaching literacy to women, four teachers interviewed mentioned these family benefits. How literacy was supposed to lead to these benefits was never concretely explained, but it was clear from interviews with learners, teachers, and others in the villages that to them "literacy" often signified not just reading and writing but rather an entire development package including all the "development" knowledge that the local NGOs tried to promote. I asked one literacy teacher (who had become literate as an adult and who was a development leader in the village) to provide me with a list of all his current uses for literacy in everyday life. He supplied me with a long list, but rather than the concrete literacy events that I had hoped for, his list included such general items as "Farming well" and "Keeping the family in good health."

The supposed family benefits of women's literacy did not generally extend to beliefs that there would or should be an actual transfer of literacy skills or attitudes from the mother to the children in the family. None of the literacy teachers interviewed mentioned this possibility as a purpose or expectation for women's literacy, although one of three learners' husbands interviewed did suggest this type of transfer. Part of the reason why the actual transfer of skills did not often enter into people's minds may be that school-type instruction was believed to be solely the domain of the school. Also, intergenerational instruction of the multiple (non-literacy) skills needed in everyday life took on a very informal form compared to school-type learning. These skills, such as farming, fishing, herding, and cooking, were acquired mostly by observing and by doing, as skilled individuals (adult relatives or older siblings) delegated tasks to the less-skilled, carefully adapting the tasks to the age, strength, and skill level of the learner. The learning activity was always integrated into the real activity, and an important motivation for doing these activities well was the pressure to perform well in front of brothers, sisters, and cousins. Children and youth were always working in the presence of peers from their extended families and beyond, which often led to competition to be the strongest, fastest, and most-skilled, as well as to increased enjoyment of the activity. A group of very young girls and boys returning from the water source, straining hard from the weight of the full buckets on their heads yet smiling and laughing as they attempt to out-walk each other without spilling too much water, was a bewildering sight for the Western observer.

When female learners themselves were asked what they needed literacy for, why they went to class, or how literacy could be of benefit to them, they did not mention family benefits at all. If asked specifically whether their literacy skills could be of benefit to their children, all said yes. When asked how, however, only one out of six women interviewed mentioned benefits through transfer of skills. The others all claimed that it would benefit their children through the money that a more literate woman would have. This notion that increased revenue through literacy would benefit their children fits in with existing socioeconomic structures of the Malian family. Women were considered property of their husbands, and all that a woman owned belonged in principle to her husband. However, in addition to working in the field of her husband's family, almost all women had a field of their own, whose production they used to supplement their own children's food. They also all practiced some sort of money-making activities (e.g., selling crops from their personal field, fabricating and selling soap, buying and reselling farm or commercial products) through which they acquired money to pay for certain expenses, such as clothing or kitchen utensils. Interviews with learners indicated that literacy was seen as one route toward improving this commerce and thus increasing their revenue. Children would benefit directly from increased revenue of their mother because she could then feed and clothe them better, as well as pay for other expenses.

The fact that actual transfer of Bambara literacy skills from one generation to the next does not appear to be a major part of the belief system was reflected in the fact that interactions between family members involving literacy learning were almost nonexistent in interview and observation data. There were a few rare examples, however. One informant said during an interview that she got her daughter and other community school students to tutor her in Bambara literacy. This woman was a literacy learner who was disappointed that classes had been suspended during the month of Ramadan; her daughter and friends were students at the community school. When some literacy activities were initiated during a later visit with this woman, her daughter and two friends who were present spontaneously helped her complete the literacy tasks, mainly by drawing letters she did not know into the dirt, and by telling her which letters came next in certain words. In a similar fashion, schoolchildren hovered around their mothers (or aunt, etc.) during administration of the literacy tests for the study, and tried to provide the answers to the questions. Another woman also reported that she and her daughter (a community school student) helped each other with literacy. An interesting aspect of these events is that they involve children helping their parents, rather than the other way around. Children in the study area were unlikely to attend school, but it was even less likely that their parents would have attended school.

A subtle form of family literacy interaction occurred during literacy classes themselves. Nursing children, up to about three years of age, generally accompanied their mothers to class. Older children also sometimes came, either to sit in class or play around the class. In Kologo, class was held during the day under a large tree, and many children would come and play in the shade around the tree. The fact that older children sometimes did learn from these occasions is reflected in the comment of one teacher at a new community school, who told me that at the beginning of the year the older children did slightly better than the younger ones, since the former had some knowledge from having observed the adult literacy classes in past years. Even if actual literacy interactions did not take place on these occasions, simple exposure to literacy, or to one's mother attending literacy class, even by very young children, may have had an impact, especially since there was virtually no opportunity for literacy exposure elsewhere.

One form of deliberate family literacy learning that did take place in some households was Arabic literacy instruction, as male adults sometimes passed on Arabic reading and writing skills to male children. Thus there were men literate in Arabic in each village that the available literacy statistics did not take into account. Although some women and girls received religious education centered around the Koran, this instruction was generally limited to recitation and did not involve learning to read and write.

In terms of same-generation influences, the study showed that husbands could be an important influence on the literacy development of their wives. Women could only go to class if their husbands authorized them to go, and many husbands were reluctant to do so. Yet most of the men who were literacy or community school teachers had at least one wife who attended literacy classes, which means that literate men may have been more likely to permit or encourage their wives to attend class. On the other hand, many female learners had husbands who were not at all literate, and many literate husbands did not oblige or authorize their wives to go to class. If a woman's co-wife attended class, for example, it was sometimes less likely that she herself would be authorized by her husband to go, since participation often interfered with meal preparation and household chores in general. (Polygamy is the cultural norm in Mali. Co-wife or co-wives refers to the other wife or wives of a woman's husband.) Some men also obliged their wives to go to class, usually because community leaders had encouraged female participation. In Kologo, the village leaders had mandated that one woman from each extended family attend class. Thus some female learners attended class only because their husbands had decided to "donate" one of their wives to class for the good of the village.

Acquisition of literacy skills had extremely limited consequences for women in the villages. Class was taught in a very didactic manner, without any emphasis on practical or day-to-day applications of the skills. Few women who attended class acquired even a bare minimum of skills, and many could not say what they might do with literacy skills if they did acquire them. Some women had attended class sporadically for years, without gaining a minimum level of literacy competence due to poor program quality and classes poorly adapted to women's needs. It is possible that perceived failure in literacy led to lowered self-esteem among certain women. For example, several women spoke of how they had not been able to acquire good literacy skills because they were stupid, and one husband reported that his wife had made no gains in literacy during her years of class attendance and was unintelligent. From a family perspective, seeing one's mother or one's wife fail in literacy class year after year may have negative rather than positive benefits on perceptions of women's and girls' education.

Some women did use literacy to keep track of creditors or make small calculations concerning commerce. However, the several women in the study who possessed a certain minimum of literacy skills (ability to read and write coherent sentences, ability to do written computation), used literacy for these purposes once a week, at most. Keeping track of creditors by the women involved making a list of three or four first names and putting a number beside the name to indicate how much each person owed. Interestingly, despite the limited uses for literacy, there was evidence that literate women were more respected because of their skills. In general however, the benefits of literacy were small, and the impact of literacy program participation on the life of women was minimal. Many of the relationships between acquisition of literacy skills and socioeconomic attitudes and practices that are often assumed to exist in both American and developing country contexts did not appear to exist in this case.

Discussion

The case studies tell the stories of two very different groups of people in very different cultural contexts. Yet there are similarities in the issues evoked in the two cases that are relevant to the United States in general.

One theme common to both case study groups is the differing agendas held by the different actors involved in the literacy effort. In the Malian communities, the initial push and the financial means for the literacy program came from the development workers. For them, literacy for women was largely a moral issue: a way to bridge the unequal educational gap

between men and women and to get more women involved in the development process. Male members of the communities, however, cooperated in efforts towards women's literacy primarily because the development workers, who were more powerful than themselves, promoted it. It was accepted by these local leaders because they believed it would help women carry out their current responsibilities better, and not that it would open any new doors for them. Thus in the villages, women's literacy as a social construct appears to have been made to fit into existing patriarchal social patterns, mirroring the current social structure rather than breaking out of it, and limiting the potential for constructive family literacy influences. Although it pertains to girls' schooling rather than adult literacy, the following comment, stated by a parent in defense of girls' education, demonstrates this phenomenon: "One literate girl leads to five literate boys."

These cross-purposes between those who funded, organized, and supplied the literacy in Mali, those who authorized it, and those who participated in it helped make it difficult for literacy to be integrated into the learners' lives in a meaningful way. Similar cross-purposes come out of the case study of Southeast Asian immigrants in the United States. Many of the English literacy programs for immigrants stress survival skills. Yet the immigrants have managed to survive tremendous difficulties prior to and during life in America, and are already quite good at surviving. Furthermore, those difficulties can be addressed by the existing community organizations. Not surprisingly then, when older adult immigrants in a Philadelphia program were asked why they wanted to learn English, they rarely brought up survival concerns. Much more important for them was the ability to communicate with children and grandchildren (Weinstein-Shr, 1993). Most family literacy programs stress parents and preschool children, yet, as mentioned in the case study, many Southeast Asian immigrants are more concerned with communicating with their older children. Another gap in agendas concerns the problems of learners' contact with schools. Some literacy programs exist specifically so that parents will interact more with schools. Yet, because parents do not see school as their business, improving English skills may not have an impact on the frequency or manner in which the adults communicate with school officials.

A second theme common to the two case studies concerns the direction of literacy influences. American family literacy programs generally stress the transfer of literacy skills from parent to young child. In Mali, examples drawn from traditional learning make it clear that peer influences on learning are extremely important. Among Southeast Asian immigrants in America it is clear that siblings rely on each other greatly in carrying out literacy-related activities, particularly homework. Also, in both the Malian and immigrant contexts current language and literacy forces have created a situation whereby children may be more likely to help their parents with literacy tasks than the other way around. In addition, the Malian example brings up the potential importance of adult-to-adult influences within a family. The family literacy movement in America could be strengthened by recognizing and legitimizing patterns of literacy transfer that differ from the traditional Western model.

A final theme raised in the two case studies is a need for educators to understand better what goes on in the lives of the learners. This understanding could have several implications. First, it would lead educators to recognize and understand school achievement models that do not conform to traditional American ideas. In general, the children of Southeast Asian immigrants discussed in the case study do well in school. Yet there was a significant absence in the homes of these children of certain features that have been identified by educators as keys to school success, such as school-like talk between parent and child, storybook reading by parents, and presence of a large number of reading materials in the home (Hardman, in press; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

A better understanding of learners' lives may lead family literacy educators to take issues of gender better into account. In Mali, even if women become literate, gender inequalities were

such that they had limited power to exercise the advantages of literacy or to influence what went on in their homes. The influence of male family members on women was very important, as the men controlled access to literacy training for women as well as most other aspects of a woman's life, including those involving her children. In the Southeast Asian communities in America, gender roles have adapted somewhat to the American reality, and families are more accepting of the need for women to work and for girls to succeed in school. However, there is evidence that traditional ideas about women's roles do persist in the immigrant communities (Skilton Sylvester, 1997). It would be helpful both to examine the ramifications of these traditional ideas as well as to build on and reinforce more modern ideas about girls' and women's roles, especially as they relate to education.

Such knowledge of the community would lead to a better understanding of the effects of literacy that may be harmful rather than helpful to the community. In Mali, the fact that members of the community who become literate tend to be young men has undermined the traditional authority of the elders. In both the Malian and Southeast Asian cases, the fact that children tend to have better literacy skills than their parents has led to a gap in communication, which may be harmful to the stability of the community. Literacy programs in the United States and elsewhere need to be sensitive to these issues in order to avoid a breakdown in family structures, which would undermine any advantages that literacy skills can bring.

Conclusion: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

By synthesizing what is known about family literacy in a cultural context, and using two case studies to illustrate these issues as well as bring up some new ones, this report has attempted to highlight several implications of culture for family literacy planning. In terms of research, practice, and policy, for example, the first major implication of the cultural issues discussed above is that educators at all levels ought to expand the vision of family literacy beyond the literate-mother-to-literate-child focus. This can be done by taking into account certain family factors that may lead to school success but that differ from the factors traditionally emphasized. Adding flexibility to the vision of family literacy would allow for experimentation with sibling-to-sibling transfer, as well as exchanges going from child to adult and adult to adult. Where appropriate, it would also recognize the potential of non-mainstream methods used by families to help children succeed in school.

Second, it is clear that effects of different literacy initiatives can be complex. For example, it is important for family literacy educators to understand fully how the effects of particular types of literacy promotion affect members of different communities. Although the influence of factors such as health, political awareness, or economics on the literacy of other family members is increasingly being taken into account, such that diverse community organizations now often work together in family literacy, an issue that often remains ignored is gender. In many American communities, the influence of power issues related to gender on family literacy may be considered minimal by educators, but in some communities it can have a powerful impact on the way that family literacy is played out. Equally important is the necessity to ensure that different actors involved in family literacy understand each other's motivations and interests.

A final implication of a cultural view of family literacy is that research needs to be built into literacy programs. Family literacy initiatives in any community should begin with focus groups or other ways of talking to people to find out exactly what types of approaches would most directly address the needs of those concerned. From such focus groups, specific desired outcomes should

be identified and then measured during and after program implementation. In order to address the concerns of policymakers and funders of programs, as well as the needs of target communities, outcomes to be measured could include some that will appeal to both mainstream and community interests, such as school grades of children and English literacy skills of adults, as well as some that may be more directly tied to the interests of the community. Examples of the latter could be children's knowledge of an immigrant community's homeland history and culture, or quality of communication between parents and adolescents. Comparisons can be made in communities between programs that use traditional mainstream approaches to family literacy and those that build on existing cultural practices rather than replacing them.

The plea for research is a common one, but it is reiterated here because there remains a huge gap between practitioners with great ideas involved in excellent programs and the researchers and policymakers. The author recently attended a U. S. state literacy conference and was highly impressed by first-hand accounts from practitioners concerning the effective family literacy initiatives they were involved in. When one presenter was asked what the operational goals of her program were and how the program intended to measure them, however, she was at a complete loss. This lack of vision concerning goals and measurement clarified for the author why detailed program information such as was presented at the conference rarely appears in documents available to researchers and others. Information about what most programs do and how effective they are is rarely documented. Such documentation is especially important when considering literacy from a cross-cultural perspective, since so much of what has been learned through research differs from traditional practice.

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